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Painting Connections

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PAINTING CONNECTIONS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
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ABSTRACT

Painting Connections consists of five sections. This includes four essays, one of which introduces my work, and three that explore, at greater length, different influences on my work. The final section is composed of plates with images of my drawings, paintings, and prints. The Introduction briefly outlines the three essays that follow, as well as gives a brief overview of how the project was conceived. The Initial Shock explores how South African contemporary artist William Kentridge has influenced my thinking about art and development of imagery. Daydreams: Learning from Gaston Bachelard and Neo Rauch delves deeper into the roles that Bachelard's writing and Rauch's painting have had in shaping my current work. An Architect Making Art reflects on the direct interaction I was able to have with contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar. The Thesis Project is meant to serve as an intellectual and academic footing for my work. It will allow me to more surely proceed on my professional path.

Keywords: Wesley Miller, Contemporary Art, Painting, Printmaking, Bachelor Thesis, Western Kentucky University Honors College.

Dedicated to my loving friends and family, who believed in me, when I was uncertain.

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VITA

August 24, 1989.....Born – Agios Nicholaos, Crete, Greece

July, 2006.....Moved from Freiburg, Germany to Louisville, Kentucky

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Visual Arts (Concentration: Studio, Track: Painting)

Major Field: Visual Studies (Concentration: Studio, Track: Printmaking)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The creative process is an endeavor of personal expression that requires an awareness of one's standing in the greater critical and academic conversation of the art world. It requires an exposure of the artist's internal life – the thought process, the fears, the dreams and fantasies – all the things that make the artist the individual he or she may be. The content of the work created becomes a reflection of its creator, a representative of her person. Therefore the content of creative work, its concept, often is the source of uncertainty for the artist. Craft can be taught, can be learned, but ideas have to be fostered, fed, grown. Painting Connections traces the development my studio work through images, while three essays give an overview of important influences outside of the classroom. The Initial Shock explores how South African contemporary artist William Kentridge has influenced my thinking about art and conceiving of imagery. Daydreams: Learning from Gaston Bachelard and Neo Rauch delves deeper into the roles that Bachelard's writing and Rauch's painting have had in shaping my current work. An Architect Making Art reflects on the interaction I was able to have with contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar.

During my Junior year, I was confused and uneasy about the trajectory of the

imagery of my work. I was dealing with violence and power struggles – Abu Ghraib, torture, abuse – and exploring themes of a sexual nature. There was a rift between the work and me. The torture pictures of Abu Ghraib and the Rwanda Genocide are horrifying and important to work with, but I could not directly relate. I knew about the incidents, but the way I approached the subject matter was too obscure. I relied on pictures brought to me by media outlets and historical texts written by scholars, without building a bridge to what I had experienced firsthand. I felt like I was using someone else's story, and I was not saying enough about my own story. I was unfamiliar with what I was talking about and knew I had to find a voice closer to my experiences.

Creatures of Myth and Legend (page 26) was a first conscious attempt to integrate a sense of heritage and history into my painting. Born on Crete, the Minotaur came to me as a symbol of my birthplace and its mythical, heroic, and fabled history. The Minotaur also happened to be a good fit in terms of my psychological state as a child of a divorced family. With the Minotaur I took a big leap into the realm of the fantastical, the surreal, and the personal. *Creatures of Myth and Legend* turned out to be a pillar in a canyon not yet connected to the bridge. It was a place to get to. One of the last pieces of the catalog, *Soldier On*, reintroduced the Minotaur, providing a stacking of context. During the time span from the first emergence of the Minotaur to his second introduction, a lot of other discoveries happened. I began to use animals alongside humans, as a narrative foil, and as a way to talk about power structures and power relationships. Following a study abroad trip to Argentina, images of meat, poverty, and wealth have made appearances to augment those relationships, and create more points of entry. All the while it was

important for the imagery to be relevant to my German and American identities.

Through repetition of a symbol or image, like the Minotaur, the symbol gains context and meaning. This method is also implemented by the South African interdisciplinary artist and performer William Kentridge to establish an astoundingly concise and consistent lexicon of imagery recurring in many incarnations throughout his broad and encompassing body of work.

Familiarizing myself with Kentridge's work has made me less hesitant to generate my own brand of imagery. Gaston Bachelard's Poetics of Space freed me to paint daydreams and fantasies, and has led me to embrace German Painter Neo Rauch more directly. Bachelard writes about daydreams and the spaces we find ourselves daydreaming in. This inspired a theme of interior settings intruded on by an exterior. An eye on Rauch's paintings was helpful in introducing history with an otherworldly sensibility, a quality found throughout his work.

A lecture and seminar by Alfredo Jaar let me observe how he uses logic and deductive reasoning to create artwork. The opportunity to gain insight into one of the greatest minds of the contemporary art world is certain to influence how I approach my own work. Jaar insists that an artist has to stay curious in order to communicate effectively. While curiosity comes second to none, the next two most important habits are editing work to a concise message and not being bound to one single medium to express that message. Jaar, an artist set to go down in art history books, gave the theory and conceptual thinking we study in class a human dimension, and has affected my outlook on the art world and on making work.

CHAPTER 2

THE INITIAL SHOCK

William Kentridge works in a wide array of media, ranging from drawing and printmaking to animation and opera, with many nuances in between. While his output varies in nature, it is always structured around his tremendous ability to draw. His drawing is the red thread that leads from one outing to the next, letting theater, film, and fine art interact seamlessly with one another. The resulting pantheon he creates is irrefutably contemporary, relevant, thought-provoking, and allows for exploration. In fact, the work itself *is* exploration: by making his process of working through an issue blatantly visible, he embarks on a journey that the viewer can partake in alongside the artist. His animations live off of this process. Kentridge captures his drawings photographically, and then alters them, creating moving images the way that Georges Méliès did in the 1930s, dragging the audience into a wild swirl of sensory bliss.[1]

Semantic cohesion is just as important to Kentridge's work as aesthetic cohesion. Over time, his work has created rich and intuitive lexica of symbols and characters to pull from, to reuse and recycle. Each time he successfully uses an image, for example the

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[1] "William Kentridge: Anything is Possible," PBS, accessed November 20, 2012, http://video.pbs.org/video/1619754531/

loudspeaker, in a new piece, he is adding on to the semantic impact of that image. The image then becomes a placeholder for an idea, and the concrete becomes abstract. Once the work is in its intended environment, the many abstracts - the placeholders, ideas - come together to inform a very concrete sense. Kentridge's work is a prime example of what art historian and critic Norman Bryson calls visual art as an "art of discourse, … coextensive with the flow of signs through both itself and the rest of the social formation."[2] Kentridge is able to articulate ideas about power and the certainty of knowledge, the two components of the dictator, feeding his ideas back into social discourse through his work and therefore participating in that discourse.

The work is meant to "recreate the initial shock," remembering the horrors of apartheid dictatorship and the struggle of South African blacks, while also layering visual cues that set it in the context of the "absurdities" of other societies of the past by connecting apartheid to the Czar over the Russian Empire or the plight of black South Africans to the exodus of Jews across Eastern Europe.[3] Kentridge's work is an attempt to process apartheid's anti-black politics in South Africa. It is the "social formation [that] is inherently and immediately present in the image."[4]

Casspirs Full of Love speaks powerfully and knowingly of tyranny and barbarism.

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2 Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation" in *Visual Theory: Method and Interpretation in Art History and the Visual Arts,* ed. Norman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991): 66.

3 "William Kentridge: Anything is Possible," PBS, accessed November 20, 2012, http://video.pbs.org/video/1619754531/

4 Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation" in *Visual Theory: Method and Interpretation in Art History and the Visual Arts,* ed. Norman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991): 66.

Bordering the macabre, the etching shows a shelf of disembodied heads, locked away, never to be seen again. Kentridge's goal is not a celebration of barbarism or even shock value, though he does want to recreate a sense of horror. Rather, as a South African will know, a "Casspir is a South African military vehicle that was used to control riots."[5] The title turns the shelf of heads into a metaphor for the treatment of the South African people by their government and military. He is participating in "the flow of signs, of discourse, of discursive power … [through which Kentridge] can work on the discursive material [, apartheid in South Africa,] … and return it to the social domain as an alteration or revision."[6]

Kentridge's more recent performance-based works return to the social domain through just that same process of revision and alteration. These modifications that Kentridge achieves by layering his own imagery and signifiers on top of the preexisting content let him address apartheid in a less literal way. Through a production of Mozart's *Magic Flute,* for example, Kentridge could inspect the relationship between characters of Mozart's masterpiece and signs within his own work. Sarastro, an all-seeing and all-knowing mage and king, becomes a sign, as he represents the benevolent dictator, all-powerful and certain in his every action. The adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* as a musical let Kentridge create a collage of source material and follow up on the ideas he hinted at in his production of the *Magic Flute.* Instead of simply reviving the famous

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5 William Kentridge, "Arist Talk," in *William Kentridge: Trace,* ed. Kyle Bentley (New York: Museum of Modern Arts, 2010): 65.

6 Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation" in *Visual Theory: Method and Interpretation in Art History and the Visual Arts,* ed. Norman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991): 69.

"[critique] of Tsarist absolutism and Stalinist Russia," he considers South African history during production, referring to it through his signs.[7] Gogol's satire of the arbitrary structure of hierarchy in 19th Century Russia becomes a vehicle to criticize the apartheid hierarchy of race, which seemingly, completely arbitrarily attached most social and political value to white skin. Next in worth were Asians, then Indians, and then people of mixed race, so called *coloreds*. At the bottom of the food chain were blacks, again for no particularly good reason.[8]

Kentridge's intellectual resistance to oppression and violence through art-making is a continuation of a tradition within art history, heralded by the likes of Käthe Kollwitz and Francisco Goya. Goya's graphic, nightmarish accounts of war crimes in *Atrocities of War* are a direct ancestor to Kentridge's gory *Casspirs of Love.* Horrifying and vile, Goya reproduces scenes of war – rape, pillage, torture. He is a war photographer in an era before photography. *Casspirs of Love* functions in a similar way – a reminder of what war does to a people, and into what creatures regular men can mutate if allotted sufficient power. Kollwitz's influence shows in Kentridge's drawing. Her influence on modern drawing is evident to anyone looking. Her powerful, gestural, expressive marks set the bar for any contemporary artist working primarily through drawing. Kentridge's drawing is not only molded by her handling of materials, but also by the content of her work. Kollwitz used her tremendous skill to draw attention to the little-appreciated mother, housewife, woman of late 19th and early 20th Century Germany. Through her work she

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7 Judith B. Hecker, "William Kentridge: Trace" in *William Kentridge: Trace,* ed. Kyle Bentley (New York: Museum of Modern Arts, 2010): 14.

8 "William Kentridge: Anything is Possible," PBS, accessed November 20, 2012, http://video.pbs.org/video/ 1619754531/

became a feminist activist and a socio-political critic of the status quo. Kollwitz did with her work exactly what Kentridge hopes to do through his – make her fellow citizens confront the inequalities within her society.

In *Painting Fear,* Emma Dexter points out that contemporary artist Marlene Dumas renders a "fresh perspective on the human condition" through her "sensual painting … [and] unflinchingly direct … expression."[9] While the aesthetic of Dumas' work greatly differs from Kentridge's work, the two do both preoccupy themselves with "the terrible political and human tragedies of our day."[10] Where Kentridge reworks the horrors of apartheid through his creating, Dumas' signifiers are "corpses lying in state, hanged schoolgirls, porno pictures," leading to "nothing short of a revelation."[11] Like Kentridge, Dumas combines, in a new way, a collection of signs, in her case repulsing imagery, effectively appropriates them as a collective, and reintroduces them into the discourse as a variation of their original.

This appropriation and reintroduction of signs that Norman Bryson talks about and that Kentridge and Dumas engage in is something I try to do with my work as well. Kentridge's variations are so successful because they utilize an interconnected, inter-referential set of imagery. Where Kentridge's signs include a steady reliance on communication technologies such as the gramophone, the megaphone, and the telephone to directly reference a breakdown of communication during apartheid, I fall back on referencing my own history, as well as relationships among human beings and their

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9 Emma Dexter "Painting Fear," *Modern Painters* Autumn (2003): 90.
10 *Ibid.* 90.
11 *Ibid* 90.

relationship with animals. I use signs that reference social class and cultural heritage, such external indicators as a burka in *Red Sliver, #1* (page 31) or a tailored suit in *Two by Two, Hands of Blue* (page 36) or *Casa Rosada* (page 34). Indicators of different human cultures interact in a very interesting way with the animal and the baggage that the history of the human-animal relationship brings, especially the relationship to the domestic animal. The designer clothing worn by the figures in *Casa Rosada* provides a stark contrast to the homeless man bunched up in the bottom left corner, immediately referencing social disparity and the wealth gap. *Two by Two, Hands of Blue*'s suits, ties, and blue vinyl gloves go in a different direction, especially opposite the two pigs. The suit and tie, as well as the suitcase and laptop, emanate corporate culture, while the blue gloves speak of an institutional procedure. The title references a government repo squad in the TV show *Firefly.* Both paintings are based on impressions gathered during a study abroad trip to Argentina. A sense of generational dynamics and gender roles hovers over *Red Sliver, #1*, where a taller woman in a burka is talking to a younger girl in jeans and leather jacket. In the background a third figure, a man, hip cocked, seems to be watching the two intently. This time, a subway ride in Hamburg provided me with source material. Kentridge commented on using the history of specific characters to enrich his work when he talked about using the horse in his retelling of Gogol's *The Nose*, observing that the horse was prominent in Russian painting, but also that it was made into glue, putting the horse in a dichotomous position of hero and victim at the same time.[12] The power relationship between humans and animals is very clearly an oppressive one. It can

[12] "William Kentridge: Anything is Possible," PBS, accessed November 20, 2012, http://video.pbs.org/video/1619754531/

function as a signifier for relationships among humans as well.

Most inspiring about Kentridge's body of work is its breadth. Kentridge seems like a modern-day Picasso, dabbling a bit in everything and turning out great results in the process. That multimedia approach to creating is extremely appealing to me. A high exposure to printmaking along with painting made my work richer and more meaningful. Approaching a subject from multiple angles has been very fruitful for me, as my drawing, printing, and painting can all inform each other, engaging in a discourse themselves. I would also like to eventually branch out into video-based projects. Emulating Kentridge's use of drawing and rearranging of shapes to create animations might be a good first step to take. In fact, I was lucky enough to experience his video-installation *Refusal of Time* at dOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel. It is a visual and auditory bliss triggering associations of New Orleans, slavery in the Southern United States, resilience, and time as ever-advancing. Where in other places he recreated the initial shock, here he created a parabola for ever-advancing time and life, the hurdles that life presents and that time overcomes.

CHAPTER 3

DAYDREAMS: LEARNING FROM GASTON BACHELARD AND NEO RAUCH

The fantastical and otherworldly has gained a strong foothold in my work. The two main contributions to this development have been Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and the recent body of work by Neo Rauch, starting in the 2000s. I relate both to my recent work.

The contemporary German artist Neo Rauch operates in such a world slightly beyond reality. As Harald Kunde puts it, he is making a "contemporary attempt to interpret the storehouse of history."[13] Rauch works through the wounds of Germany's history, most prevalently the German Democratic Republic's history, in which Rauch grew up. His work is about dealing with disconnects, be they of visual or narrative nature, and then joining those seemingly separate pieces into a coherent image with its own internal logic. Gary Tinterow calls this a "psychological possibility."[14] My interest in Rauch was first piqued through my discovery of his most recent work, pieces such as *Der Vorhang* and *Abstraktion*. Rauch uses powerful color schemes and ridiculous shifts in scale to achieve beautifully harmonious compositions beyond anything observable.

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13 Harald Kunde, "Pictorial Strategies," in *Neo Rauch,* ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth et al. (New York: Taschen, 2013), 121.

14 Gary Tinterow, "A Parable of Painting," in *Neo Rauch,* ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth et al. (New York: Taschen, 2013), 338.

Western master painting aesthetics are seemingly folded into ancient narrative schemes correlating size to importance. What exactly that narrative is remains undefined. References to historical clothing and architecture often seem to place the happenings in Germany's history, but beyond that Rauch's allegories are open to interpretation.

It is that undefined aspect of the German painter's work that seems so relevant to what I am trying to achieve in my work. I try to keep the mystery alive, while addressing my original idea, and letting the process of painting inspire me to see new possibilities and directions for the imagery to go in. I build up a visual history in layers and invite an excavation of the imagination. The work takes on qualities of a palimpsest, an index of what was, or what might have been. Rauch similarly looks to provide a "permeable membrane of interpretive shades," granting the viewer a freedom of exploration of history and human behavior while refraining from introducing specific political or historical narratives and taking sides.

Like William Kentridge's work, Rauch's speaks about class and power structures and violence in a universal tone. I try to achieve a universal tone in my own work. Similar to the interpretive shades that Rauch works with, I aim to impart a sense of mystery and search into my work. At the same time it is important for me to come back to an imagery that relates to my personal history. I was born in Crete to a German mother and American father, raised until adolescence in Germany, and completed high school in Kentucky. I combine this seemingly disparate reservoir of sources into images that speak to me. The disparity created through this meshing of my backgrounds allows me to enter a liminal space in between realities and fantasies, much like Rauch does. Commonplace

images can become symbols and placeholders for ideas or concepts, and transcend self-reference. I address issues of social and political importance in a realm once removed from reality, where elements from the observable world ground the abstracted, unreal environment in the viewer's own. While the personal history makes for personal narratives, the content is often universally understood. In the same vein, Rauch's work should not be read as "a report on current political events, but rather an incarnation of a fundamental conflict, whose details must be imagined anew by each viewer in his own time."[15]

Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* helped me embrace the imagined more fully in my own work. Previous to reading Bachelard, fiction like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Autumn of the Patriarch*, and Haruki Murakami's *Windup Bird Chronicle* have introduced me to the world of magical, or fantastical, realism in literature – Rauch's work is contemporary to theirs. However, I was having trouble making my own version of it. *Bife y Chorizo* (page 33) can certainly be seen as a turning point, fleshing out my ideas of a disjointed reality I had previously explored in *Casa Rosada* and *Water Flowing Underground* (page 28).

Water Flowing Underground is the earliest of the three pieces mentioned. A man and a woman walk together, both are dressed in contemporary fashion. She is absorbed in a mobile device, while he looks back at her, dragging her along. Bright pastel-colored stripes seem to delineate the borders of architecture, placing the scene in an urban setting,

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15 Harald Kunde, "Programatic Motifs," in *Neo Rauch,* ed. Hans Werner Holzwarth et al. (New York: Taschen, 2013), 229.

while also referencing science-fiction visions of the future à la *Tron*. Strangeness enters the scene with the large goat in the foreground, and a heard of the animals further in the distance. Questions are asked, but none are answered directly. In the context of works such as *Comfortable Creatures* (page 25) and *Red Sliver, #2* (page 31), it becomes clear that the goat is a character. The goat becomes a symbol, a placeholder for ideas or concepts, and transcends self-reference. In light of my history, Crete and the seemingly idyllic, yet harsh and often tragic, life on the island comes to mind. It speaks of the beauty of the Mediterranean culture and lifestyle.

Following a study abroad trip to Argentina, *Casa Rosada* and *Bife y Chorizo* become more coordinated. *Casa Rosada* directly references the Argentine executive branch of government by name, while pairing the flamboyant and beautiful fashion worn by those who can afford it with the homeless who sleep on cardboard in doorways. There is not interaction between the homeless man cramped into the lower left corner and the man and two women who are seemingly oblivious, or jaded, to his situation. Only the dog perks into the homeless man's direction, who already turned his back on the world. While the scene is exemplary of the experience I had during my stay in Buenos Aires, as an outside observer and as a participant – not interacting with the homeless – it is applicable on more than one level, and to more than one situation. The piece speaks of neglect, of disconnect, of disregard and disinterest in others' plight, applicable to relationships of personal and of international scale. *Bife y Chorizo* speaks in a similar tongue, only here material wealth is pared down to food sold by a street vendor. The scouring female dog adds another dimension into the power play, another character to project upon, another

foil to the narrative. I repeat images in different settings, rearranging their context, and therefore expand the possibilities of interpretation, similar to the way that "Rauch has fashioned a set of tools that gives him the liberty to depict real and imagined tumults, tests of power, and massacres without having to relinquish the unbiased detachment of the authorial narrator."[16]

Reading *The Poetics of Space* has made me more aware of the meanderings of my mind. I am more conscious of where my mind goes when I sit in a corner or a nook. I used to not pay particular attention, but now I do. I have embraced following a whim while painting. Drifting off into thought has now become a more conscious method of generating imagery. With *Stargazer* (page 39) and *What's For Dinner* (page 40) I have already been taking steps toward what I had been reading in García Márquez and Murakami, but the pieces are small and labored. The otherworld is there, but it isn't quite flowing out of me, it still had to be coaxed out. Following Bachelard, and being exposed to Haruki Miyazaki's movies, *Spirited Away* in particular, I could construct my otherworlds more organically. Bachelard gave me something like an academic license, freeing me of a block, encouraging me to embrace my daydreaming, rather than just setting it aside. Miyazaki's work acted in a very similar way. His movies are so fantastical, and in such a natural way, so in tune with his culture and its history that it showed me a path that I could follow, that heavy lifting has already been done, and I just have to follow along and discover things for myself. With this new, emancipated mindset I created a new series of 42x50inch paintings, including *Daydream (Nutztier)*, *Gates of*

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16 *Ibid.* 228.

Hell, *Soldier On*, and *The City Won't Sleep Tonight* (pages 41 through 44).

The four paintings take part in the same thematic arch of the interior and safe being intruded upon by the exterior – the mysterious, the fantastical, and the strange. Bachelard was instrumental in the development of that theme. About corners, Bachelard muses that they are "a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most – immobility."[17] Immobility in turn is being at peace with one's corner. Like in *Gates of Hell* and *Daydream (Nutztier)*, the corner, the surrounding architecture, becomes an enclosure, a shell that the dreamer can daydream in, enclosed and cut off from the surrounding world. With *Gates of Hell*, the figures are tucked into a literal corner, quoting Bachelard quite directly. A serpent creature winds in and out of the walls, as a section in the corner gives way to a seeming opening with a view of the Concentration Camp Auschwitz/Birkenau. In *Daydream (Nutztier)*, the imagery is less charged, more humorous, as a giant tuna comes floating through a bedroom wall, followed by a trail of sushi rolls. While *Gates of Hell* deals in quite a direct way with my history as a German, *Daydream (Nutztier)* explores power relationships through the human-animal relationship. *Nutztier* is German for *utility animal*, where the sushi trail clearly indicates who is being used by whom. At the same time, the blue tick hound is serving as a pillow. While this is certainly a sign of love and trust, it is also an exertion of pressure by one animal on another. Lastly, the human can be a *Nutztier* as well, as ancient and modern history can prove.

With *Soldier On* and *The City Won't Sleep Tonight*, I continued to explore the

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[17] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 137.

idea of the daydream slipping from the outside into an inside. The space in *The City Won't Sleep Tonight* is unstable. The walls suggest an interior, a room with a corner. The decaying deer head eating the flowers growing out of the floor questions its interiority. Through the walls, a collage of historical photographs from the 1945 firebombing of Dresden suggests an exterior element pushing through to an interior space. That back and forth creates a tension that takes the scene beyond the everyday. *Soldier On* takes a psychological approach in transforming the figure in the foreground into a Minotaur, a tortured and lonely creature, feared and locked up to die alone. His solitude is reaffirmed by the two soldiers from two different wars – a German soldier of World War II, and an American soldier of Vietnam. The solitude of the Minotaur and the breach of history through the two soldiers suggest that the soldiers are an imagination, while a depiction of observable reality is negated by the Minotaur himself. Similar to the collage of the ruins of Dresden in *The City Won't Sleep Tonight*, *Soldier On* incorporates images of the artillery shelling of Homs that had been going on in Syria while I was working on the piece. The two create in that way a dialog about violence and war, about the present and the past. Spaces help us daydream and remember. Personal history enters Bachelard's discussion of daydreaming early, as he gives particular importance to the house, especially the one of rearing and childhood. The house one was born in is a point around which "reciprocal interpretations of dreams through thought and thought through dreams ... keep turning."[18] Remembering history becomes both an opportunity for escape and a frame of reference in which to frame an argument. For the artist, this contemplative

[18] *Ibid.* 16.

drifting of the conscious mind will hopefully lead to "great images [that] have both a history and prehistory; [such a] blend of memory and legend ... [makes sure] we never experience an image directly."[19]

The spontaneous connections that only the daydream can forge have become increasingly important to me. Rediscovery of forgotten memories through associations have let my creative output become more in tune with my identity and my history.

[19] *Ibid.* 33.

CHAPTER 4

AN ARCHITECT MAKING ART

He believes in *the power of a single idea*. Art is *99% thinking and 1% doing*. Contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar thinks and plans – logic dictates his approach to artmaking. A rigorous vetting process lets Jaar identify a single issue or idea he wants to tackle in a project, or public intervention. He determines what the work will be about, what audience he wants to reach and communicate with, according to which he triangulates what medium will make for the best possible work. The process through which he prepares his many interventions is designed to conceive of a design that optimally communicates the idea that he wants to introduce to the public. Jaar is always trying to convey a very specific idea relevant to the site of the project. I was able to participate in a two-hour seminar that Jaar conducted with a group of students, in which he shed some light on how he approaches his projects, and how he thinks through them.

Jaar was born in Santiago de Chile and grew up on the French part of the island of Saint Martin. French education equipped him with the sensibilities of a Cartesian logic that lent itself to an education in Architecture. He considers himself an Architect making art, taking into account the social, political, cultural, and visual space of the location with which he works. His approach to thinking through content reveals the architect, the

Cartesian. Jaar's insistence on curiosity, in turn, reveals the artist in him. The two come together in his idea that *there is nothing better than getting lost, as long as you can get back to the hotel*.

The seminar was designed to convey three messages: do what makes you happy; you are a response to all the stimuli you perceive; and art has nothing to do with technical skill. His first advice to do what makes one happy explodes into a web of complication once securing livelihood becomes part of the equation. Jaar's advice on marrying employment and artistic practice is to find a way not to make one's vocation within the art world, once again easier said than done. His concern there is that the very confined nature of the art community might cause one to gain the reputation of *nice guy that ships works for artists.* It makes sense not to want to become another artist's employee. Perhaps employment at the collegiate level avoids that stigma, instead underscoring the academic sturdiness of one's work.

By making a person the response to all the stimuli they receive, Jaar says that only curiosity provides the push necessary to experience new things, to investigate, to ask questions, to interact with people. These experiences form our person and our thought, and therefore our art, a thought that is immediately relevant to how I think about my work. Curiosity leads me to read and watch books and movies that explore new ideas. Curiosity is the reason I wake up to NPR. Being informed of current events and dabbling in fields outside of studio art lets me cross pollinate ideas and make the content richer and more relevant to more people. A tangible example of curiosity leading to one of Jaar's projects is his anecdote from a project in Montreal. Walking around downtown Montreal, Jaar was contemplating the possible nature of his Montreal-based project. He had been doing research for a few days – a sociological approach involving reading and interviewing people. He notices a white van pull up to a building and men

unloading boxes. Investigating what was going on, he found out that the van was delivering food to a food bank for the homeless, tucked away behind a nondescript apartment front. Montreal's homeless community drew his attention, and he conceived of *Lights in the City*. The intervention allowed Montreal's homeless to communicate their presence by illuminating the cupola of the former capitol in red. The cupola would light up whenever a button was pushed in one of the Homeless shelters around the former capitol, raising awareness of the homeless without exposing them. The curiosity that led to *Lights in the City* is a version of the curiosity that is central to my learning process. Influences from travel, conversation, the news, or literature eventually circle back to inform my work to let me address personal history in multiple ways, and let me make it accessible for others.

One of the clearer examples of making this conversion of experienced stimuli into readable pictorial language is my 2013 painting *Soldier On*. Self-portraits as the Minotaur of Cretan myth, a German soldier of WWII, and an American soldier from the Vietnam War reference my connection to the Greek, German, and US-American culture. With grandfathers in both WWII and the Vietnam War, both wars have severely impacted my family. The collage of pictures taken in Homs while it was shelled by artillery in 2012 and 2013 that makes up the city scape speaks of Syrian lives being lost at this moment. The arabesque decoration is a salute to Middle Eastern culture, while the still life on the table can be read as homage to the tradition in Western painting and a reminder that no matter how hard it is, you have to keep on living, sustaining yourself, soldiering on. The Minotaur speaks to the futility of war and violence, referencing both the Greek myth and Picasso's *Guernica*.

After agreeing with Mr. Jaar on the importance of the first two points, quite readily, I

have to examine his third point of the needlessness of technical skill a bit closer. Alfredo Jaar is a conceptual artist, a thinker, who conceives of works in the media most suited to convey his message as authentically and as accurately as possible. He often ponders projects for multiple years, before coming up with the master plan, and never only works on one single project. By eliminating deadlines, creativity and calculation can come together to conceive of his aesthetic masterpieces. Once he identifies an issue he wants to tackle, he pares it down to a very specific, very personal, very relatable aspect of the issue, like a single person's fate. In *The Silence of Nduwayezu*, the million victims of the Rwanda genocide are represented by a mountain of identical photographs showing the eyes of Nduwayezu, a boy who witnessed his family being slaughtered. In response he could not speak for three weeks. With this particular project, as with all others, Jaar tackled a specific issue for a specific audience – presumably Western museum-goers. Having a specific audience is important for Jaar, since he measures his work's success by its ability to communicate with that audience, getting a response from the audience. An example of communication working better than he could have imagined is the *Skoghall Konsthall* intervention, where he built a paper museum for a town lacking any cultural institutions, only to burn it down. He highlighted the danger of the absence of an interest in one's culture and history. In response, Skoghall's people wanted him to design a real museum, a task Jaar never anticipated when devising the project.

Once the issue and audience are established, Jaar goes on to create lists of possible approaches to the project. A few days later, he comes back to the list, crosses it out and starts over. This highly fascinating process is repeated, allowing time to pass in between tackling the list, as *most bad ideas will not withstand time*. Eventually, lists that may have started out with 50

items in a column can be revised and reincarnated to come down to only five or eight items that seem to withstand the test of time. Next, those ideas are thoroughly vetted for a set of criteria that applies to the personality of the artist. If one idea is *economic*, *daring*, and *cryptic*, and another is *specific*, *personal*, and *poetic*, then the *poetic* idea might be more applicable than the *cryptic* idea. Personal preference and relevance to the specific site, the idea, and the audience are most important. Ideally, Jaar's method will lead to the one approach to the idea that is just right, an approach that hasn't been taken before. To figure out if an idea is a new approach, one has to be aware, and research how other people have previously tackled the issue of interest. Research is where curiosity comes back in to play. The more curious and informed one is, the better one can draw parallels and articulate ideas more concisely. His method aims to take the anxiety of uncertainty and guesswork out of the process. To ensure to his best abilities that his idea will relate to his audience, a team of assistants and he examine the project from the view of all thinkable vantage points. If the project cannot withstand the scrutiny, Jaar tries to find *Points of Entry* for different groups of potential viewers, for example, kids, and introduces those groups to the work. Once the project is approved, he hands it off to professionals, who construct the project in the intended space. This is why for him art has to do little with skill and is all about thought. While I can agree that the idea, the thought, is finally what turns craft into art, and its absence as what may turn art into craft, I cannot yet say that I am more interested in the problem-solving of the concept than the problem-solving of its actual creation. I cannot divorce myself from the idea of expressiveness and process in my work, though I will most definitely call upon aspects of Jaar's method as I need them.

Jaar's disinterest in skill, however, is not meant as a disowning of skill or craft. Rather,

Jaar disagrees with the unconsidered approach of expressing every idea through the same craft. He sees a need for artists to diversify skills in order to be able to communicate a diverse set of messages. This is where Jaar sees a problem with current art education. Rather than pursuing an education in strictly one medium, for example painting, a more ideal educational setting would be an interdisciplinary one, where one's mode of expression is questioned. Alfredo Jaar's weariness of homogenous art education is in line with a trend in contemporary art to address issues in more than one way, for artists to become Renaissance men of sorts.

His talk was challenging and eye-opening. I am certainly not ready to adopt his way of thinking wholly, but his conscious call for heterogeneity is very appealing to me. Multidisciplinary facility is what attracts me to artists like William Kentridge and Alfredo Jaar, it is what makes these artists so incredibly successful in our globalized and interconnected world, and it is something I want to pursue in my own career. The 24-hour time span in which I was lucky enough to experience Alfredo Jaar for a combined six hours might turn out to be life changing.

Comfortable Creatures, Lithograph, 2012 – 10 x 13 inches

Creatures of Myth and Legend, Acrylic on Canvas, 2012 – 48 x 48 inches

Invasive Behavior, Acrylic on Board, 2012 – 20x18 inches

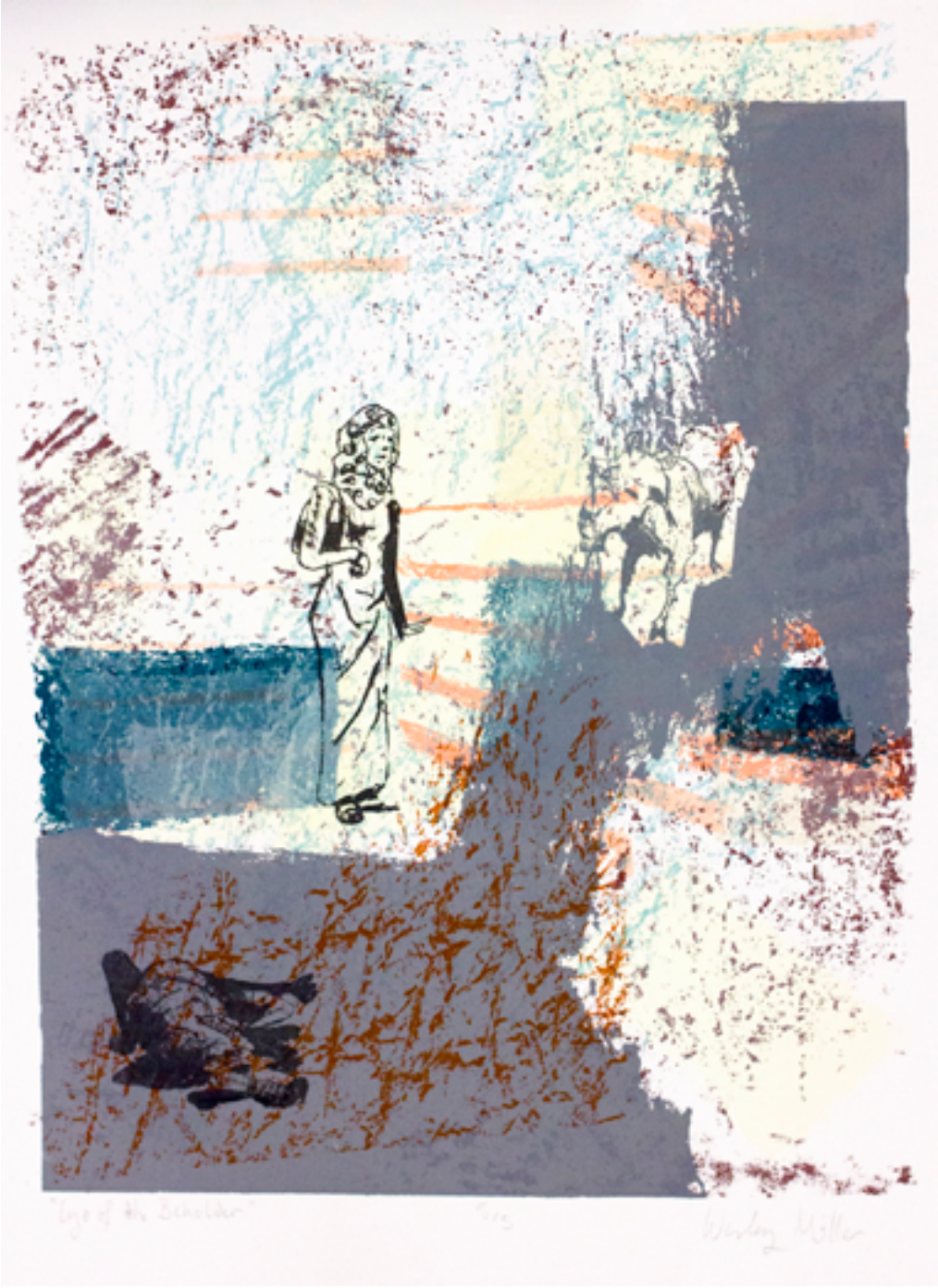
Water Flowing Underground, Acrylic on Canvas, 2012 – Diptych, 38x65 inches

Gaza, Charcoal, Ink and Collage on Paper, 2012 – 22x30 inches

Omnivore, Charcoal on Paper, 2012 – 22x30 inches

Red Sliver Nr. 1, Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 17x12 inches (left)

Red Sliver Nr. 2, Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 17x12 inches (right)



Eye Of The Beholder, Screen Print, 2012 – 15x11 inches

Bife Y Chorizo, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2012 - 40x29 inches

Casa Rosada, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 42x36 inches

Ascent/Descent, Screen Print, 2012 – 11x15 inches

Two By Two, Hands Of Blue, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 42x36 inches

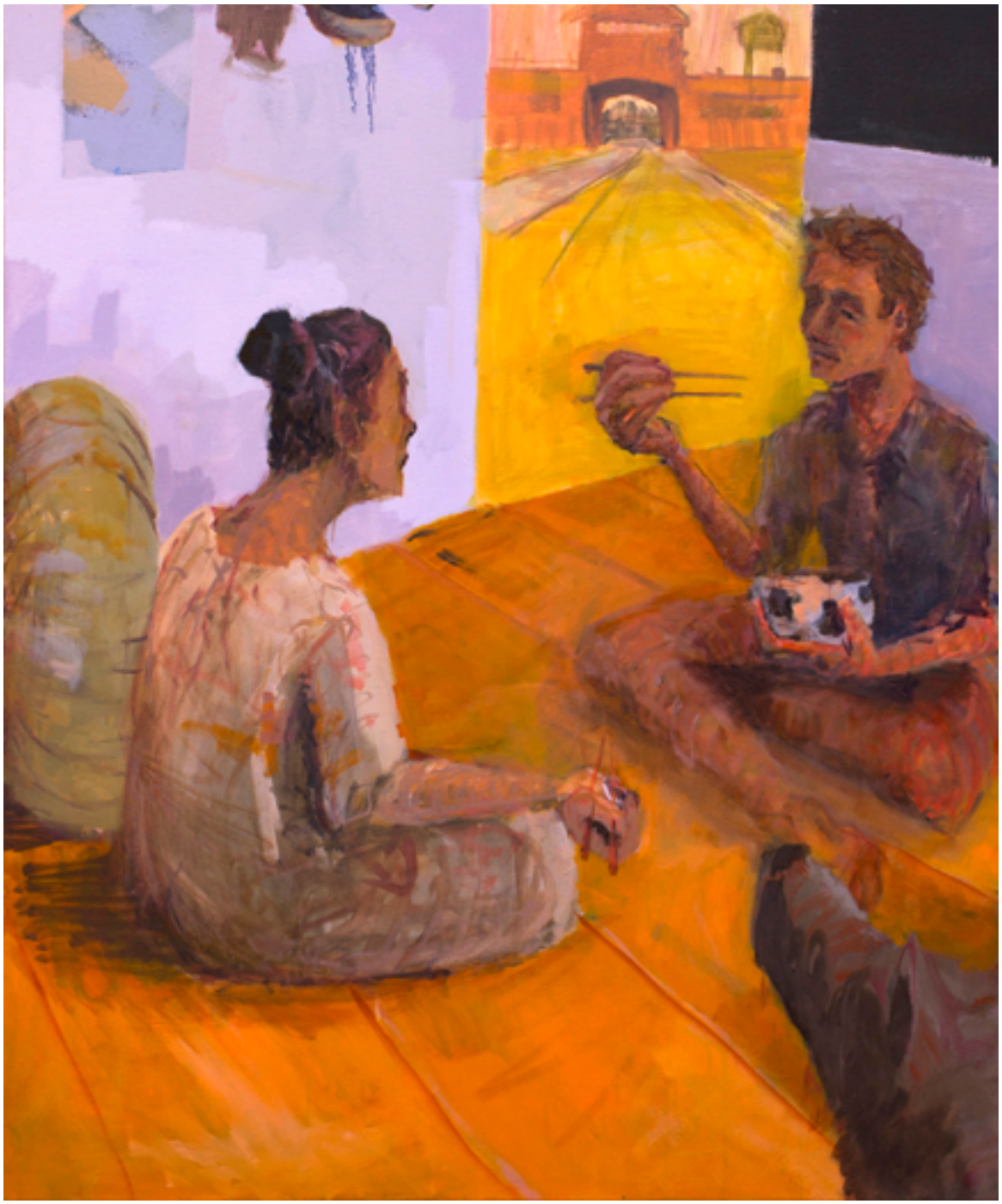
Orwellian, Screen Print, 2012 – 14x26 inches

King of Tobacco, Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 27x22 inches

Stargazer, Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 27x22 inches

What's for Dinner?, Oil on Canvas, 2012 – 27x22 inches

Daydream (Nutztier), Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2013 – 42x50 inches



Gates of Hell, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2013 – 50x42 inches

Soldier On, Acrylic, Collage, and Oil on Canvas, 2013 – 42x50 inches

The City Won't Sleep Tonight, Acrylic, Collage, and Oil on Canvas,
2013 – 42x50 inches

As I Do, Not As I Say, Acrylic, Collage, and Oil on Canvas, 2013 – 42 x 50 inches

Geometry of War, Charcoal, Ink, Gesso, and Collage on Paper,
2013 – 22 x 30 inches

Playdate, Charcoal, Ink, and Gesso on Paper, 2013 – 22 x 30 inches

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